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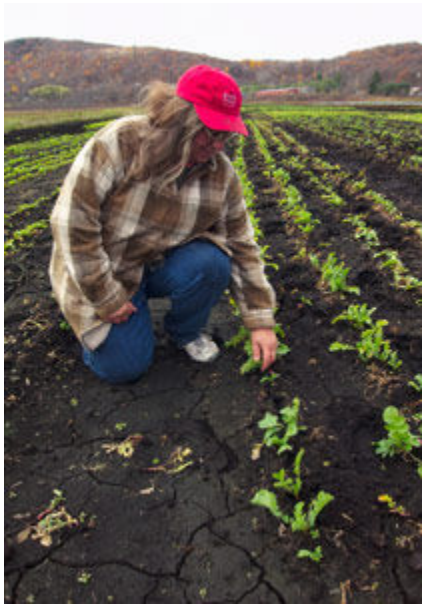
# Genius Farmer

By Susan Piperato | Photos by Tom DiMauro



MacArthur grant winner Cheryl Rogowski checks her radishes.

**On September 20,** just after the Black Dirt Country—the strip of rich soil on the Orange County-New Jersey border—had been hit with heavy rains, Pine Island farmer Cheryl Rogowski was wondering what to do. Not only were many crops underwater and possibly not harvestable, but she was expecting a visit from Joan Gussow, director of Just Food, a nonprofit organization that supports sustainable farming and equitable produce distribution to impoverished families. "Everything was wet, and I didn't know what I was going to show her," Rogowski recalls. Then the phone rang, and W. Rogowski Farm changed forever.

"I was working in the farm kitchen when I answered the phone. It was a Mr. Socolow from the MacArthur Foundation," says Rogowski. "He said, 'Oh, by the way, Joan's not coming today.' I thought, how does he know that? Then he asked if I was alone."

Daniel J. Socolow, director of the Fellows Program at The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, had called to tell Rogowski that she had been named a 2004 MacArthur fellow, and would be receiving an unrestricted five-year stipend totaling $500,000, commonly known as the "MacArthur Genius Award."

After Socolow's phone call, Rogowski set off for the fields, where she walked up and down the crop rows, letting the news sink in. "I'm not religious, but I am spiritual, and I did a lot of talking to the big guy that day," she says. "I was really in a state of shock." According to the rules—which state that nominators must remain anonymous—Rogowski could only tell one person the news, so she decided to tell whomever she saw first—which wound up being her mother. Rogowski's brother Michael, sister-in-law Sarita, and sister Susan found out the news at 12:15am on September 28, when the Macarthur Foundation released the names of its winning fellows online.

"The phone started ringing at 7am that day and hasn't stopped," says Rogowski. "I'm the first American farmer to receive this award. But it's a big responsibility—they're taking a big risk on me." Although Rogowski is free to spend the award as she chooses, she plans to put it toward several projects designed to benefit her community. "People here care; they're vocal about what they want and don't want. They're adamant about preserving open space and farms. We're losing farms

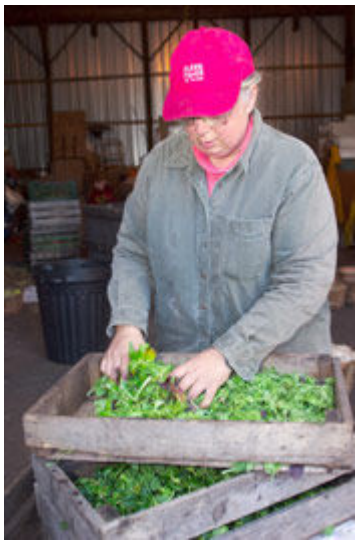
everywhere to development or because the next generation doesn't want to farm, so I want to turn [the money] around and give the farmers here something back."

Crates piling up at W. Rogowski Farm in Pine Island.

Rogowski plans to continue the farm's community-supported agriculture program (launched in 1998, it has grown from 12 to 156 local and Brooklyn members) and participation in El Puente ("The Bridge") CSA for low-income people. She will also keep running on-site English lessons for migrant workers, mentoring Future Farmers of America students, selling at metropolitan farmers' markets, sitting on several agricultural organizations' boards of directors, and helping with innovative sustainable farming programs like Just Food and Minetta Brook's annual art-of-food festival "The Tastemakers" (which sponsored Christian Phillip Mueller's living sculpture of soil, featuring black dirt from the center of Rogowski's farm). Rogowski also plans to complete a Cornell University farm leadership training program, obtain a currant-grower's license, and extend the farm's currently cultivated 60 acres.

**"I wear a lot of hats,** and I'm adding many feathers," says Rogowski. But her greatest ambition is to renovate and certify the farm's processing and test kitchen and obtain a caterer's license in order to establish Black Dirt Gourmet, a brand name for food products (from jams to sauces to vinegars) made with local produce. "The produce doesn't have to come from my farm, but it has to be local and in season. The premises will use other farmers' produce and small processors in the area. It'll work like this: I'll take your cabbage, process it into sauerkraut and get it back to you labeled with your farm name, saying it was processed at my facility." Rogowski's extended wish list of projects also includes building an outdoor kitchen and creating a picnic area to offer "Dinner in the Garden" nights.

The Black Dirt Country, formerly the US onion capital and currently the producer of half New York State's onions, is comprised of 5,500 acres along the Wallkill River, including the communities of Warwick, Florida, Minisink, Wawayanda, Chester, Goshen, and Pine Island, where both Rogowski's parents grew up on family farms. Black Dirt Country's rich, incomparably dark soil is the remains of a huge shallow lake that formed 12,000 years ago when the last glaciers melted. Eventually the climate warmed, and vegetation and animal life proliferated there, including Mastodons like "Sugar," whose bones were found near Sugarloaf and have long been displayed at Orange County Community College. Eventually the lake turned to swamp, with the area's organic matter decomposing in water that often



Cheryl Rogowski sorting greens

exceeded 12 feet. This verdant mess lay untouched until the late 1800s when immigrants from Ireland, Germany, Italy, and Poland discovered the area, calling it "muckland," and began cultivating onions there.

"My great-grandfather came from Poland and used two-man saws and horse-drawn plows to clear the swamp," Rogowski says. "Geologically speaking, this is the second largest contiguous tract of land of its nature in our country, second only to the Everglades in Florida. It's very shallow and it's protected so we can't build on it—Paramus [New Jersey] was once all Black Dirt Country, now it's all gone."

**W. Rogowski Farm** was established in 1950 when Rogowski's parents, Walter and Lillian married. Over the years, they bought up tracts of garbage dump to clean up for cultivating onions and other crops on 120 of its total 150 acres. Rogowski began farming in 1983 when the Onion Harvest Festival was reestablished and she was crowned Princess. The next year, still in her early 20s, Rogowski received 5,000 acres from her father and grew broom corn, sunflowers, zinnias, chili peppers, ground cherries, "anything my father wouldn't grow," she says. "I wanted to see what would go, and it all went."

Meanwhile, the farm hit some difficulties. A soil infestation left the family with the choice of spending "six-plus figures to fumigate, with no guarantee that it would work, cease farming altogether, or practice diversity," says Rogowski. "My dad decided to plant less onions, adding tomatoes, peppers, potatoes, and pumpkins." The farm thrived, began selling at metropolitan farmers' markets in the late 1980s, and eventually started a CSA. "Dad said 'There's no way anyone's going to pay for food before we grow it.' When I handed him the money from our first 12 members' installation payments, he couldn't believe it," Rogowski recalls.

Late-season radishes

In 1999, Rogowski's father died after years of failing health, and Rogowski and her brother took over, with Rogowski serving on various agricultural steering committees in her father's place. This past spring, Rogowski took on the farm full-time, branching out into growing everything from raspberries to Native American squash to freckled lettuce to dinosaur kale to black beans to 50 types of chili and 20 types of garlic, to basil that "customers can smell a block away," to Mexican herbs like pepicha, pallo, epazote, and cilantro, all sold weekly at the farm stand, farmers markets in Warwick and New York City, through the CSA, and to local and metropolitan restaurants. Diversification is the key, Rogowski says. "It's 'get big, get weird, or get out.' We got weird, and it's worked."

On a bright autumn afternoon, Rogowski maneuvers between the sharp green crop rows over tar-black soil, its nearly-loamy-enough-to-squeak surface riddled with thick tractor treads inky mud puddles, pointing out her family's collection of antique farm equipment, her sister's socks hung from poles to keep deer away, Pochuk Mountain, and "Ring Field," where her father harvested the crop that paid for her mother's engagement ring. Pausing near the future picnic area, she recalls a CSA member who once visited the farm from Brooklyn and couldn't stop crying. "I couldn't figure out what was wrong," she says. "Then she told me she'd grown up on a farm in the Caribbean and she thanked me for doing what I do. That's the connection I want to keep going, whatever I do." Besides, she says, "I sometimes joke that I was born in the dirt. When I see the black hills, I know I'm home."

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